

Gabriel Prudhomme

Early Settler
1791-1831

by Daniel Coleman

Of Kansas City's early founders, Gabriel Prudhomme is one of the most problematic to historians because so little evidence remains to tell the story of his life. Added to the bare facts, however, some information about the community of which he was a part provides a general picture of what his life may have been like.

The earliest non-Native American community established near the confluence of the Missouri and Kansas Rivers consisted of about two dozen families of French descent. They were led to the area in the early 1820s by François Chouteau and his brothers, Cyprien and Frederic. They were sons of Jean Pierre Chouteau, a prominent St. Louis fur trader, and they came here to ply the family business, hoping to establish a way station from which trade goods and furs could be sent up and down the Missouri River.

The families who arrived with the Chouteaus were French-speakers, and many came either from St. Louis or French Canada, another center of the North American fur trade. The men were skilled boatmen and survivalists, spending long periods in the wilderness trapping beaver, otter, and other furbearing animals. Periodically they returned with loads of their lucrative pelts, spending time with their wives and children, socializing at informal gatherings and dances, and attending services performed by missionary Catholic priests traveling through the area. Many took up farming during these periods of relative domesticity.

Gabriel Prudhomme, his wife Josephine, and their seven children were members of this community. A family tradition, recalled in later years by a great-granddaughter, assigned French Canadian origins to Prudhomme. Records exist of his 1831 purchase of some 257 acres of land, the modern-day boundaries of which read like a description of the most valuable real estate in Kansas City. Bounded by Holmes to the east and Broadway to the west, the property included everything south from the Missouri River to Independence Avenue. Prudhomme farmed this land, ran a small grocery and tavern, and possibly conducted a ferry service—decades would pass before the first bridge crossed the Missouri—

from a natural stone landing on the property.

Prudhomme was killed late in 1831. The exact details of his death are unknown, as is his final resting place, but it is widely held that he perished in a brawl among fellow settlers. He left a pregnant widow and six children ranging in age from 2 to 14, but no will.

Over the next several years, a brisk trade blossomed along the Santa Fe Trail, and the town of Westport, located just a few miles south of the stone wharf on the Prudhomme property, became an important center of frontier commerce. Much controversy has surrounded the disposition of the Prudhomme family's inheritance, which was soon determined to be an ideal spot for unloading steamships carrying people, equipment, and freight bound for Westport and parts further west. The initial sale of the property by James Hyatt McGee, who had been declared legal guardian of Prudhomme's heirs and who had accepted an outrageously low bidding price, was declared null and void.

But the second sale, conducted by the Sheriff of Jackson County, established a bit of immortality for the French fur trapper who died so young and left no tombstone. The buyer this time was a group of 14 investors who divided the property, sold lots, and developed along the river's edge what they had decided to call the "Town of Kansas." It became Kansas City, of course, and from Prudhomme's land would spring its first City Hall, as well as the busy wharf and surrounding blocks of hotels, taverns, and merchants that were its original town site.

Sources

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